

Pride & Politics

Gays and lesbians continue to gain ground politically and are seeking greater acceptance and influence in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Ron Smith is openly gay, divorced and the father of a 7-year-old boy who doesn't know his father is a homosexual. Although he is a civilian now, Smith served as an open gay in the U.S. Army during the Clinton administration. His friends and family are straight. His roommate is straight. And when asked about his gay activism, he is thrilled. "I am so glad you asked. I never get to talk about it," he tells *Insight*.

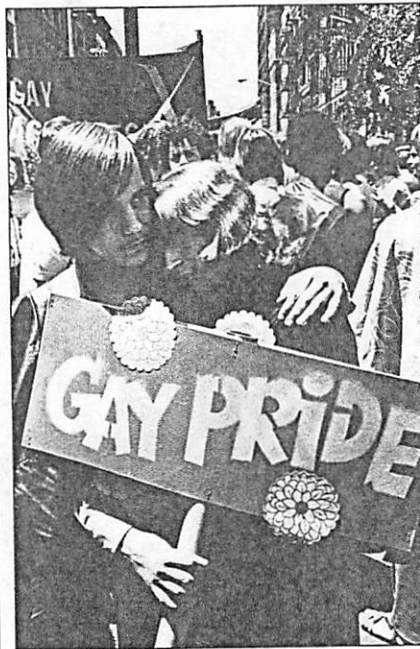
But Smith is one of the angry activists who have gained momentum on high-profile issues such as Paramount's decision to support *The Dr. Laura Schlessinger Show* on TV because of the hostess' opposition to homosexual conduct. Smith never had listened to Dr. Laura, a straight arrow if ever there was one, but when the call to arms came through gay Websites to attack the TV program, Smith responded and contacted its commercial sponsors through gay-community e-mail and with signed petitions.

Whether the issue is Dr. Laura, the Boy Scouts, military service or getting more openly gay candidates into positions of power, gay activism is here, persistent, but no longer self-consciously offensive.

In fact, it has come a long way since the 1969 Stonewall tavern riot in New York City that first mobilized homosexuals and initiated a militant gay movement that sometimes has sought to assault and insult the institutions of traditional morality in the name of equality.

"Gays and lesbians are emerging as a distinctive interest group," says Steve Sanders, who for four years has been teaching a class on gay politics at Indiana University. "They have moved from being a social movement to more of an interest group with established lobbying groups, political-action committees and a distinctive voting profile. It's a

By Diana Ray



group that is out and is exercising influence." Assistant to the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and openly homosexual, Sanders proposed to teach the class because of his own involvement in gay politics and because he felt there was an interest on campus.

University classes such as the one Sanders teaches are not new. Sixty-year-old political-science professor Ron Hunt has been teaching classes on gay politics at Ohio University in Athens for 20 years. Hunt, who also is openly gay, says, "I started teaching the class when I first came to Ohio. I had slowly and surely come out as an openly gay professor and, in the late 1970s, was approached by grad students to do an independent course on gay politics. After a time it dawned on me that I had enough material to teach regularly scheduled classes on the subject. I taught it as an experimental course for

two years and, afterward, got it approved through the curriculum."

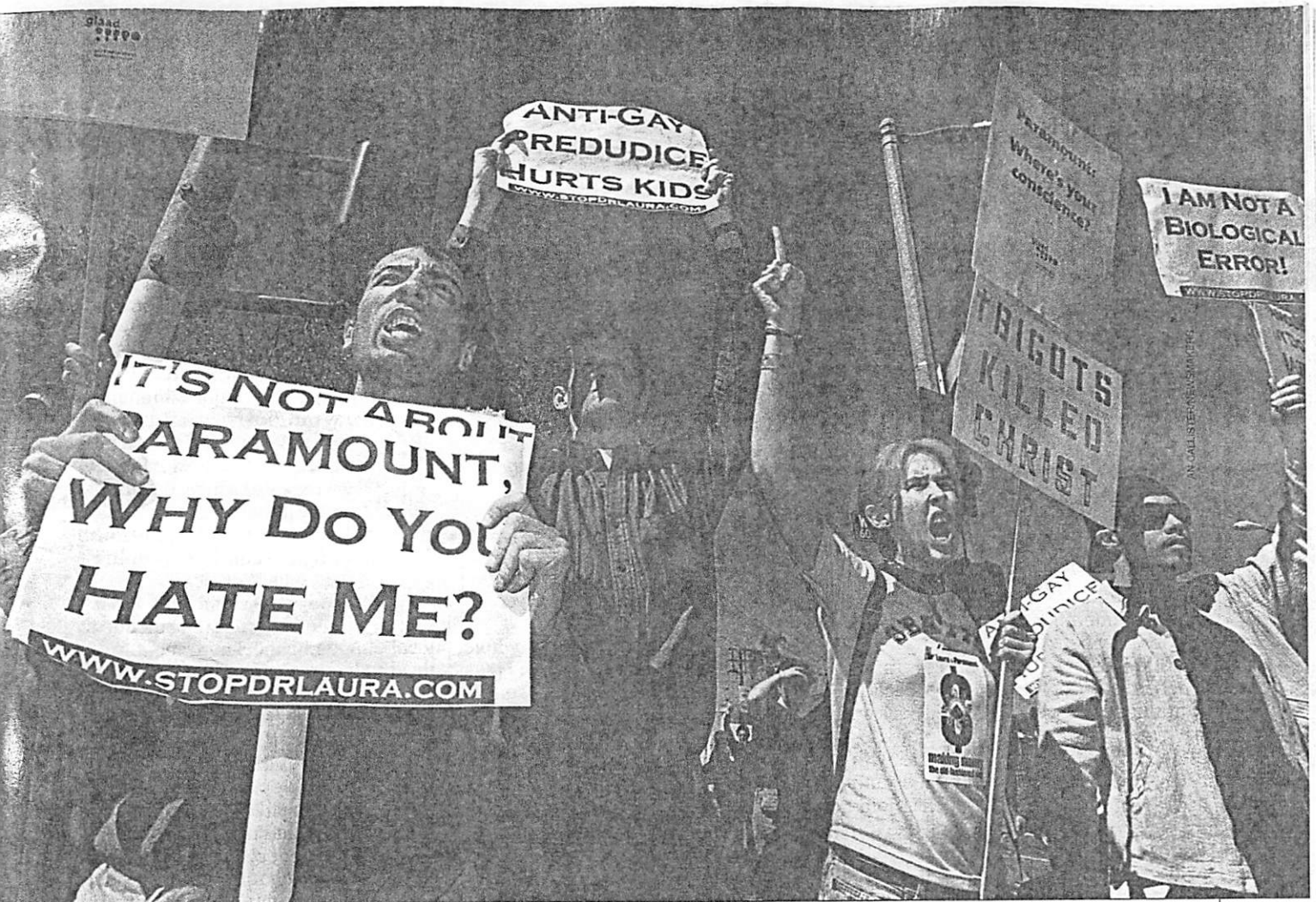
Now, Hunt says, he keeps the class size to about 50, but interest has grown to the extent that the course always closes because it fills up.

Hunt and Sanders agree that the gay movement gained great momentum with Bill Clinton in 1992 when he was the first presidential candidate to address gays at fund-raisers and include them in his vision for America. "Clinton was the first to acknowledge and ask for the gay vote, and he established a gay and lesbian liaison officer within the White House," says Sanders. That, coupled with the inclusion of gay identification in exit polls for the first time in the 1990s, and the issue of gays in the military raised early in the Clinton administration, helped to solidify the community's identity as a valid interest group.

"It is no longer a phenomenon of radical activists screaming in the streets, but one of having money, influence and working for influence," Sanders tells *Insight*.

But the movement is hard to define in numbers, since there are no definitive studies on what percentage of the population is gay, according to the Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington. Estimates range between 1 and 3 percent, although some questionable studies claim the figure could be as high as 10 percent. Usually, however, activists include family members and friends of gays who may be straight and often don't agree with the mainstream gay community.

While serving under Clinton's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, Ron Smith became convinced that homosexuals can serve harmoniously within the military and should be allowed to do so. "Every one should have a shot, if they want to," he says. But as far as the Boy Scouts go, Smith says he sees no problem with the Supreme Court decision



Making a stand: *The gay movement has mobilized against Dr. Laura.*

this year allowing the Scouts to ban homosexual leaders. "I was a Boy Scout growing up and I think the Scouts should be allowed to do what they want in peace. The gay community should respect their beliefs and right to do so."

Although Smith's perspective does not parallel that of prominent gay political organizations, it is people like him who are turning to those groups to stay informed and have influence, says Sloan Wiesen of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund. The fund is a national organization with the sole mission of increasing the number of openly gay and lesbian political candidates. According to Wiesen, it was founded in 1991 and has helped nearly to quadruple openly gay officials from 49 to 200 across the country. "In most of America ... our community remains largely without representation in our government, and we have found that we can help fix the discrimination problems by addressing the representation problem."

Wiesen says his organization has contributed \$2.5 million to candidates during the last decade. Before the

November elections, there were three openly gay representatives in the Congress: Barney Frank, D-Mass., Jim Kolbe, R-Ariz. and Tammie Baldwin, D-Wis. Additionally, this election year saw the first openly gay U.S. Senate nominee of a major party, Democrat Ed Flanagan of Vermont.

Sloan calls it progress that this is the first presidential election in which the support of the gay community has been solicited openly by candidates as early as the primaries. He says that so far the Democratic Party is seen by gays as the more sympathetic.

In a 1996 article for the *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, Barney Frank wrote: "At every level of government, and in every region of the country, the Democrats are significantly better than the Republicans on the issue of defeating homophobia and protecting us against unfair discrimination. Why, then, the ambivalence on the part of gay men and lesbians about following the advice of Samuel Gompers, who in the early days of the labor movement in America announced the political principle that he said should govern those seeking to use the political process to advance important goals: reward your friends and punish your enemies? For

gays and lesbians in the current American political climate, this means strongly supporting Democrats nearly all the time."

The number of openly gay delegates at this year's Democratic National Convention was nearly double that of 1996, says the Democratic National Committee, and the party has its own gay and lesbian outreach coordinator. The Republican National Committee tells *Insight* it refers all outreach inquiries to the Log Cabin Republicans (LCR), an independent gay organization. But Kevin Ivers of the LCR says the real political debates on gay issues concerning discrimination are happening within the Republican Party because the Democrats have taken the community for granted. He says that although the Democrats have organized outreach groups, those entities do not have autonomy and must carry the complete line of the Democratic Party to get support. Ivers claims that exit polls show 25 to 33 percent of voters claiming to be gay say they vote Republican.

Both Democratic and GOP political activists tell *Insight* that their goal of acceptance never will happen until both parties embrace the gay community as equals within the political cul-

ture. The professors and other activists point to the increasing number of gay characters on television and increasing news coverage of gay issues as having helped to integrate the community's acceptance into the mainstream culture while giving young people gay and lesbian role models.

Besides more entertainment celebrities and elected officials, the last two years have seen a revolution in communication within the gay community with the aid of the Internet. It offers gays the opportunity to be both discreet and involved, as well as providing a vast amount of news and information pertaining to gays. America Online's gay Website, *Planet Out*, informs visitors that "The 2000 presidential election is a crucial one for gay men and lesbians. It will go a long way toward determining whether the progress of the last decade continues or the clock is turned back on gay rights." *Planet Out* and other sites effectively keep readers in tune with related political and social issues and offer ways to get involved, such as joining gay political organizations like the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), whose annual budget now is \$20 million and membership 250,000, according to HRC spokesman Wayne Besen.

"With the Internet," Besen says, "gays can come out at their own pace. It has been huge for young men and women or those that are isolated." The downside, he says, is that it has attracted hate groups.

Smith originally learned of the Dr. Laura issue on the nightly news but, within 24 hours, he tells *Insight*, he was receiving and responding to action-alert mailings through organizations such as HRC. One of the most visible was the *StopDrLaura.com* Website created over a four-day period by 36-year-old John Avaroses of Washington with the help of a few friends. Avaroses writes a mailer called "The List" that discusses gay issues and had included comments on the Dr. Laura issue. He says the response was so overwhelming that he decided to write an action alert that read, in part:

"When *60 Minutes'* Andy Rooney belittled Native Americans, he got suspended.... When Jimmy the Greek stereotyped blacks, he got fired.... But when Dr. Laura calls gays biological mistakes, she gets a TV show from Paramount. Enough is enough."

The alert elicited so much response that Avaroses and his friends decided to create their Website to keep the pub-



Hill veteran: Frank, left, has been an openly gay congressman for 20 years.

lic informed on the issue. "This whole campaign has been running on \$15,000, a majority of which was raised selling T-shirts on our Website. It has grown into a movement, and everyone is welcome," Avaroses tells *Insight*. He says about 20 percent of the funding came from private individual donations and from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

How long will the campaign continue? "Until the show is cancelled," says Avaroses. The Website includes daily updates of who is advertising and who is not, as well as excerpts from advertiser explanations for reconsidering sponsorship of the program.

"It's impossible to overestimate how important e-mail has been to linking people," says gay-politics instructor Sanders. "Just a couple of major Websites, including *StopDrLaura.com*, have allowed lots of people to monitor *The Dr. Laura Show* on a daily basis saying, 'Here are the advertisers and here's how you can e-mail consumer affairs to let them know how you object.'"

Besen from the HRC agrees: "With the Internet, it's easier for gays and lesbians to become more active and get connected. People are coming out sooner and realizing injustices."

One of those injustices, according to Besen, is the Supreme Court decision to allow the Boy Scouts to ban homosexuals from participation as Scout leaders. Although Besen acknowledges the Boy Scouts as a fine institution, he uses an analogy comparing the group to the Ku Klux Klan.

"Any analogy of Boy Scouts to the Ku Klux Klan is offensive," says Gregg Shields, a spokesman for the Boy Scouts. "The Boy Scouts of America does not preach hate. It preaches

respect and kindness toward all. In terms of access to schools, we ask to be treated as any other not-for-profit organization under the school's policy."

Since the Supreme Court decision, numerous school boards, city councils and charities such as the United Way have been persuaded by gay activists to halt or reduce support. But Shields isn't concerned. "If we were to take a major hit tomorrow, tomorrow night the planned Boy Scout meetings will still go on," he tells *Insight*. "If we received a huge donation of money tomorrow, but we didn't have Scouts coming to the meetings, Scouting wouldn't happen. That's what's critical."

United Way spokesman Phil Jones says the United Way does not dictate to local chapters concerning their funding, but he tells *Insight* that only 20 or so chapters out of 1,400 have reconsidered funding for the Boy Scouts. Of those that have reconsidered, only a few have stopped funding the Boy Scouts completely. "Supporters of the Boy Scouts have been very vocal at the national level, but I have to keep telling people that the decision to affect Boy Scout funding is at the local level, and that it is those chapters that must be contacted."

Shields says, "We've been litigating this for 20 years. Girls have sued to be Boy Scouts, atheists and agnostics have wanted to be leaders and they have all lost." Shields notes the organization was sued unsuccessfully in 1980 by a homosexual adult who wanted to participate openly. In the same year, when a 19-year-old scoutmaster assistant in New Jersey joined a university gay and lesbian association, he was asked to end his relationship with the Boy Scouts. He also sued, but lost in the lower court, and that is the case that made it to the Supreme Court in 2000.

According to Sanders, the Supreme Court decision probably has helped the gay movement. "I think it's been a good thing because it has led to such tremendous organized efforts among the gay community."

But as vocal as organized gays have been on the issue, Shields denies that he's worried. "We can certainly have tolerance and respect and we don't have to accept everyone's belief and don't have to accept everyone. We're not a fund-driven organization. We are a mission-driven organization. And our supporters have made it clear they want this organization and the principles it teaches." ●